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The Impact of Identification on Adherence to Group Norms in Team Sports: Who Is Going the Extra Mile?

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The present research investigates the applicability of the Normative Conflict Model of Dissent (NCMD; Packer, 2008) in the context of team sports. The core assumption of the NCDM is that strongly identified group members adhere to group norms less (i.e., deviate more) when these norms are potentially harmful for the team. We accompanied a football team over the course of a season (22 time points) and assessed players' (n = 11) identification with their team, adherence as the overlap between individual and team goals, and disengagement as willingness to leave the team. Results showed that weakly identified players adhered to, but strongly identified players deviated from, unambitious—thus potentially harmful—team goals. Moreover, deviance elicited disengagement among weakly but not among strongly identified players. Our findings demonstrate the relevance of the NCMD in sports teams. Implications are discussed with respect to the beneficial aspects of deviance for teams.

Keywords: team sports, social identity, group norms, norm adherence, deviance

Every group leader values team spirit and a team that stands in close ranks. What is colloquially described as loyalty is referred to as adherence to group norms in social psychological terms (Terry & Hogg, 1996; Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999). The current research investigates the link between identification and norm adherence among members of a sports team—a question that, to the best of the authors' knowledge, has not been addressed empirically before. We aim to combine the traditional social psychological perspective suggesting that identification comes with more adherence to group norms with recent theoretical advancements in the field, namely the Normative Conflict Model of Dissent (Packer, 2008). Specifically, we investigate whether the core assumptions of this model—identification leads to deviance from norms that are harmful for the group—is applicable to sports teams, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the link between identification, adherence to group norms, and deviance in applied settings.

The Relation Between Identification and Adherence to Group Norms

Norms are essential for an optimal development and functioning of groups, and they play a critical role especially in team sports because they provide salient and legitimate standards of excellence (Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002; Mullen & Baumeister, 1987; Mullen & Copper, 1994; Prapavessis & Carron, 1997). Adherence to group norms is an expression of task commitment, which has been demonstrated to be the most important component of cohesiveness in the cohesiveness-performance effect (Carron et al., 2002; Mullen & Copper, 1994). This means that norm adherence potentially positively affects performance in team sports and that coaches are well advised to value conformity. This intuitively plausible as-

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sumption receives empirical support by the vast amount of studies which demonstrate that strongly, more than weakly, identified group members adhere to group norms (e.g., Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1996; Sassenberg, 2002; Simon et al., 1998).

It is important to note that we use the term adherence to group norms to refer to individuals' behavior in line with a group norm that is not necessarily detrimental to their individual motivations. Thus, rather than denoting acting against one's own will as in the case of conformity, adherence to group norms denotes acting on behalf of the group (Terry & Hogg, 1996; Terry et al., 1999). According to Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Self Categorization Theory (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), the reason for individuals' adherence to group norms is that, because of a process of internalization, these norms and goals have gained the same relevance as individual norms and goals. This process has been demonstrated in a body of research (e.g., Brewer & Caporael, 2006; Moretti & Higgins, 1999).

Social psychological research has demonstrated that identification with the group is one of the strongest determinants of group members' adherence to group norms (Terry & Hogg, 1996; Terry et al., 1999; Turner et al., 1987). We know surprisingly little about the impact of identification on adherence to group norms in sports contexts. In many other contexts, identification has been shown to positively affect adherence to group norms. Research on group-based self-regulation (Sassenberg & Woltin, 2009; Sassenberg, Matschke, & Scholl, 2011) for instance demonstrated that failure on identity-relevant tasks (i.e., tasks that are important for the scrutinized social identity) elicited negative emotions, more effort, and more persistence in order to make up for the group's shortcomings among strongly compared to weakly identified group members.

Along similar lines, Ouwerkerk, de Gilder, and deVries (2002) manipulated the status of psychology students to be either lower or higher compared with psychology students of another university. Participants could improve the group's status by responding as fast as possible to a series of stimulus-response tasks. When group status was high and improvement was thus not required, identification levels were unrelated to participants' reaction time. By contrast, when group status was low and thus required improvement, participants who were strongly identified with the group of psychology students worked significantly faster on the tasks compared to weakly identified group members.

Contemporary Perspectives on Conformity and Deviance

Despite the vast number of studies that empirically support the theorizing about the identification-conformity link, there have been some interesting recent developments that we will address in the following. From a descriptive and evaluative point of view, researchers lately noted that continued adherence to group norms can indicate stagnation and low flexibility of groups (Jetten & Hornsey, 2011). Deviance and dissent are viewed as essential for group development, ingroup flexibility, and innovation (Packer, 2008). Research within this line of thought showed that strongly identified group members react more positively to ingroup criticism (Hornsey, 2006).

More intriguingly, it has been argued that highly identified group members are more likely to *deviate* from group norms in certain situations (Packer, 2008; Packer & Chasteen, 2010). This prediction stands in stark contrast to the abundant evidence for the positive relationship between identification and norm adherence as briefly reviewed above (Ouwerkerk et al., 2000; Sassenberg & Woltin, 2009; Sassenberg et al., 2011; Terry & Hogg, 1996; Terry et al., 1999; Turner et al., 1987). However, if we think about deviance as potentially benefitting the group, this somewhat counterintuitive notion becomes more plausible: If strongly identified group members are more concerned with the group's welfare, and deviance (i.e., nonadherence to group norms) benefits the group's welfare, then strongly identified group members should deviate from group norms more than weakly identified group members. The normative conflict model of dissent (NCMD; Packer, 2008) was developed to account for the seemingly paradoxical relationship between identification, adherence to group norms and deviance from group norms.

The Normative Conflict Model of Dissent

The NCMD (Packer, 2008) aims to provide a plausible rationale for the observed variability of high identifiers' adherence to group norms. The model is built around the notion that strongly identified group members will adhere to or deviate from core group norms depending on their perception of the current group norm as potentially beneficial or harmful for their group. Harmful group norms can be norms and goals that are too rigid or outdated to allow for a flexible adaptation of a group to changes in society (Jetten & Hornsey, 2011). As we will argue in the remainder of this article, in the context of performance-oriented groups such as sports teams, harmful group norms can also be reflected by unambitious group goals.

Empirical studies in the laboratory support the suggestion that high identifiers engage in deviant behavior such as whistle blowing with the aim to protect their group (Hornsey, 2006; Packer, 2008; Packer & Chasteen, 2010). However, deviance is also associated with aversive outcomes: Deviants face the risk of social exclusion, rejection, and punishment by fellow team members (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Castano, Paladino, Coull, & Yzerbyt, 2002). Consequently, group members usually try to avoid being a deviant. Deviance should be even more aversive in highly cohesive groups such as sports teams because these groups exert more pressure on their members to adhere to group norms (cf. Prapavessis & Carron, 1997). Packer (2008; Packer & Miners, 2012) argues that weakly identified group members might be less tolerant toward the aversive effects of deviance and thus less willing to take the risk of receiving negative reactions from other ingroup members. Conversely, weakly identified members will more likely respond to deviance with disengagement—thus, they will leave the group if that is possible.

We aim to test the predictions of the NCMD in a sports team. Specifically, we expect that in a football team,[1] strongly identified players will deviate from group norms when they perceive these to be harmful for their team. Surprisingly, no research to date has addressed the link between players' identification with their team on adherence to group norms. We aim to fill this gap and to show that players who are strongly identified with their team are willing to "go the extra mile." We predict that strongly identified players, although in general adhering to group norms more than low identifiers, will deviate from group norms that potentially harm the group. Further, we predict that weakly identified players are less tolerant of deviance and, thus, more likely than their strongly identified counterparts to disengage from the team.

It should be noted that the NCMD explicitly conceives of the direction of deviance as being irrelevant for weakly identified group members. That is, whereas strongly identified group members would be expected to challenge group norms especially when these are detrimental to the group's welfare (for instance, unambitious group goals), weakly identified group members "are less likely to be concerned about whether norms are detrimental to the group" (cf. Packer, 2008, p. 55). Put differently, whether they deviate from group norms in a positive direction (i.e., wanting more than the group) or in a negative direction (i.e., wanting less than the group) is regarded as motivationally irrelevant for weakly identified group members (Packer, 2008). Consequently, in contrast to the other predictions that we derived on basis of the NCDM, the specific prediction regarding the association of deviance and disengagement among weakly identified group members is nondirectional.

We will describe the field situation, operationalization of the dependent measures, and hypotheses below.

The Present Research

To operationalize the constructs in which we were interested in a way that accounted for the particularities of the field situation, we defined adherence to group norms as the overlap between individual and group goals and willingness to leave the team as an indicator of disengagement as a consequence of normative conflict (i.e., deviance). Please note that this approach closely follows the rationale provided by Thibaut and Kelley (1959). These authors concluded their analysis of group norms and group goals stating that "by virtue of their common dependence on consensus, norms and

[1] Football is British English for what is referred to as soccer in American English.

group goals are very similar, sometimes. . .being virtually indistinguishable." (cf. Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, p. 257).

We defined potentially harmful goals as goals that were unambitious. Our rationale was that group goals should be ambitious to motivate players to play high-quality football and be persistent throughout a complete season. Especially with respect to the established positive relation between specific high goals and performance (Locke & Latham, 2006), we felt confident that defining unambitious group goals as potentially harmful and ambitious group goals as beneficial for the team was a practical distinction. We further measured players' identification with their team. We expected that the association between group goals and individual goals will be moderated by levels of identification with the team (*Identification Hypothesis*), and that strongly, but not weakly, identified players will deviate from unambitious team goals (*Deviance Hypothesis*). We further expected that deviance, because it reflects levels of normative conflict, will elicit disengagement among weakly, but not among strongly, identified players (*Disengagement Hypothesis*).

Method

Sample

We accompanied a football team over the course of one season. The football team was part of the sport society of the local university, but not all players were students. Of the 16 players who took part in the data collection, 11 were chosen for the data analysis because they filled in the questionnaire at least 17 of 22 times, (M_{age} = 22.55, SD_{age} = 6.02, *range* from 17 to 38 years). Players' experience ranged from two to 20 seasons of actively playing football (M = 6.73, SD = 5.12), yielding a mix of inexperienced and experienced players.

Procedure and Dependent Measures

Players generated six goals for the upcoming season in a training camp shortly before the start of the football season. Specifically, from a pool of goals that were generated for both the individual and the team level by players themselves and by the coach, the most frequently named goals were chosen. Further, goals were chosen that were applicable to both individual players and the team. The goals that fulfilled these criteria were rank-ordered by the coach according to how ambitious they were. This resulted in a six-point scale that was equally applicable to individual players and the team as a whole. In this scale, the most ambitious goal received the highest value (6) and the least ambitious goal received the lowest value (1), yielding the following scale: To be promoted to the first federal league (6); to achieve the second place in the table (5); to achieve the third place in the table (4); to achieve the sixth place in the table (3); to show good performance during the complete season (2); and not to perform worse than in last season (1).[2] Please note that these goals are ordinal- rather than interval-scaled.[3]

The questionnaires were administered every week during the complete season. To assure anonymity, we developed a code that protected participants' identity but allowed to match the questionnaires longitudinally. Players received the questionnaires once a week after the weekly match in an open envelope. After completion, players sealed the envelopes themselves. This procedure also served to avoid self-presentation issues that might have aroused through the presence of the coach after the match.

[2] In Germany, a team's rank in a football table refers to their standing in the respective league they are playing in. Usually, only the teams that rank at the highest three places (sometimes only the first place) of the table will be promoted to the next higher league. The football team that we accompanied played in the second highest league in German women football. The team's most ambitious goal (equalling a value of 6 in the coach's goal ranking) was to be promoted to the highest federal league ("Erste Bundesliga"). Because in the second federal league, only 12 teams are competing for the respective places in the football table, the third-ranking goal of achieving place six in the table reflects a transition from being promoted to the next higher league (which is possible only from the three highest places in the table) to finishing in the average midrange of the table, without a chance of being promoted to the next higher league in that season.

[3] Treating goals as ordinal predictors by collapsing across goals that were directly related to being promoted (i.e., ambitious goals with the values 5 and 6) and goals that were unambitious (goals with the values 1–4) did not alter the reported findings. We consequently report the analyses treating goals as if they were nominal scaled.

Adherence to Group Norms

Throughout the season, players indicated their group-based and individual agreement with each of the six goals. For the first goal, the corresponding statement was "In the ongoing football season, my team's (*group-based*)/ my personal (*individual*) goal is to be promoted to the first federal league." The five other goal-statements were worded accordingly. Thus, if a player agreed with the most ambitious goal on the group level, her group goal was noted as 6. If she individually also strived for the most ambitious goal (6), she would show maximum *adherence* due to the complete overlap between group-based and individual goals.

Deviance Score

Decreasing overlap between group-based and individual goals reflected increasing normative conflict (i.e., deviance). The deviance score could range from zero (indicating perfect overlap between group-based and individual goals) to five (indicating maximum discrepancy between group-based and individual goals).

Disengagement

We used players' willingness to leave the team as an indicator of disengagement from the team. Players responded to the question "How much would you like to leave your football team within the next months?" (from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*).

Identification

In contrast to the other variables which were measured at each time point of data collection, players' identification with their team was measured only once during the training camp shortly before the start of the football season with four items (e.g., "I feel strong ties with the members of my football team" from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*; adapted from Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995). The items were averaged to form a scale ($\alpha = .84$). On average, identification with the team was high ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 0.90$). Levels of identification were significantly above the midpoint of the scale, $t(10) = 8.59$, $p < .001$.

Data Management and Analysis

To account for the dependency of the repeated measures taken from participants we used a procedure similar to the one advocated by Gleibs, Mummendey, and Noack (2008). The unit of analysis was the number of observations. In the current sample, this was 11 (number of participants) $\times 22$ (number of measurements). The resulting number of observations of 242 reduced to 218, because not every player was present at each game.

Team goals and players' individual goals were highly correlated ($r = .72$, $p < .001$). Given that sports teams are highly cohesive groups (e.g., Carron et al., 2002), this strong relation is not surprising. However, highly correlated variables introduce the problem of multicollinearity in the regression analysis. To avoid this problem, we used residual scores as predictors. The residual score for players' individual goals was computed by regressing individual goals on team goals. The residual score for team goals was computed by regressing team goals on players' individual goals (this procedure follows the suggestions by Bizman & Yinon, 2002). All dependent variables were z-transformed before the analyses.

Results

To test the *Identification Hypothesis* and the *Deviance Hypothesis*, we regressed players' individual goals on team goals, ingroup identification, and the resulting interaction term. The regression model was significant, $F(3, 215) = 6.58$, $p < .001$, $R^2_{adj} = .07$. The residual score of team goals did not significantly affect players' individual goals, $\beta = -.06$, $t < -1.00$, $p > .37$. Identification with the team significantly affected players' individual goals, $\beta = .20$, $t(215) = 3.01$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.41$. Importantly, the predicted interaction between identification and team goals was observed, $\beta = -.23$, $t(215) = -3.46$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.47$. This finding supports the prediction that identification affects the relation between players' individual goals and the team's goals (*Identification Hypothesis*). Further probing of the interaction (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed the predicted association of identification and deviance (see Figure 1a). The simple slopes show that players' identification levels did not affect confor-

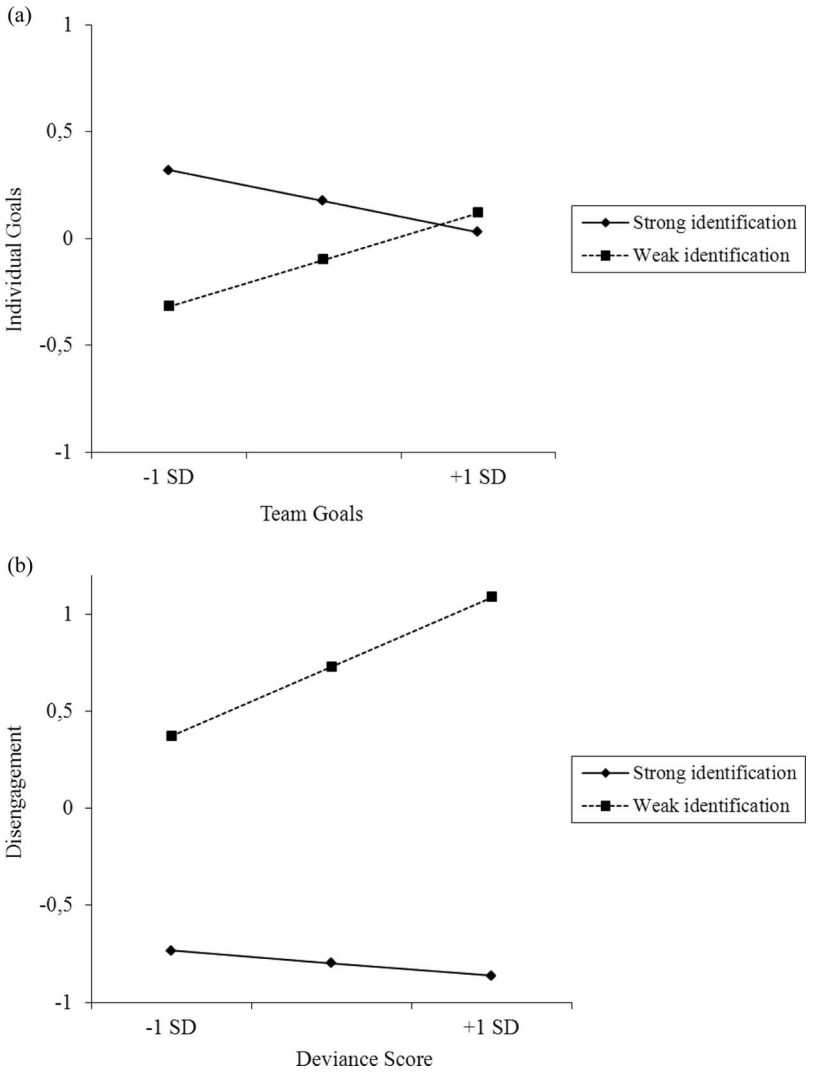

Figure 1. Simple slopes for (a) the adjustment of individual goals to team goals (indicating adherence to group goals) as a function of ingroup identification and (b) the association between the deviance score (indicating levels of normative conflict) and disengagement as a function of ingroup identification.

mity adherence to group goals when team goals were ambitious (i.e., not harmful for the team). By contrast, when team goals were not ambitious (i.e., potentially harmful for the team), strongly identified players deviated from these goals, $\beta = -.40$, $t(215) = -3.45$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.47$, whereas weakly identified players adhered to these goals, $\beta = .29$, $t(215) = 2.37$, $p = .019$, $d = 0.32$. These findings support the *Deviance Hypothesis*.

To test the *Disengagement Hypothesis*, we regressed players' reported disengagement on the index of normative conflict, identification, and the resulting interaction term. Prior research demonstrated that team success is an important determinant of team support (e.g., Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986). To control for this, we also included outcomes of the football matches (success vs. tie vs. failure) into the regression model. Thus, disengagement was re-

gressed on normative conflict, identification, result of the game, and on all resulting two-way interactions and the three-way interaction. The regression model was significant, $F(7, 211) = 43.83$, $p < .001$, $R^2_{adj} = .58$. Normative conflict was positively associated with disengagement, $\beta = .15$, $t(215) = 2.93$, $p = .004$, $d = 0.40$. Identification with the team significantly affected players' disengagement, $\beta = -.79$, $t(215) = -14.11$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.92$. Importantly, the predicted two-way interaction of identification and normative conflict was significant, $\beta = -.15$, $t(211) = -2.99$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.41$. No other effects were significantly associated with players' disengagement, all βs < 0.6, ts < 1.1, ps $> .29$. Further probing of the interaction (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that in line with predictions, normative conflict was positively related to disengagement among weakly identified players, $\beta = .36$, $t(211) = 3.73$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.51$. By contrast, no association between normative conflict and disengagement was evident among strongly identified group members, $\beta = -.07$, $t(211) = -0.86$, $p = .391$, $d = 0.12$ (see Figure 1b). This result supports the *Disengagement Hypothesis*.

Discussion

The present study was the first to examine the effects of identification on norm adherence and deviance in a sports team. Based on the core assumptions of the Normative Conflict Model of Dissent (Packer, 2008), we predicted and found that strongly identified players deviated more from potentially harmful group norms. Weakly identified players, by contrast, adhered to such norms. Moreover, the present research was the first to empirically investigate the assumption that strongly identified players are less vulnerable to normative conflict. That is, strongly identified players' disengagement from the team was not affected by levels of normative conflict. Conversely, for weakly identified players, disengagement was affected by normative conflict such that increasing normative conflict (i.e., deviance) elicited an increased motivation to leave the team.

We operationalized potentially harmful group norms as unambitious group goals. Our findings indicate that strongly identified players fight against harmful group norms in a subtle but potentially effective manner: They deviate from such goals by means of sticking to ambitious individual goals. Put differently, strongly identified group members appear to pull their team in a favorable position. By doing so, they accept the risk of negative responses from other team members to their being deviant (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Castano et al., 2002). This strategy likely has positive effects for team performance, as indicated by the positive effect of high, ambitious goals on performance that has been established in numerous studies (for an overview, see Locke & Latham, 2006). Thus, by setting ambitious individual goals, strongly identified players might actually perform better and thereby instigate a virtuous cycle of ambitious goals and high performance (Lindsley, Brass, & Thomas, 1995).

In a similar way, a sports team including a relatively high number of weakly identified players might face a vicious cycle evolving from these members' tendency to adhere to potentially harmful group norms (i.e., unambitious goals). As the current research showed, weakly identified players adhered to potentially harmful group norms by adjusting their individual goals to unambitious group goals. As outlined above, this strategy might ultimately curtail the team's overall performance by instigating a vicious cycle of unambitious goals and poor performance (Lindsley et al., 1995; Locke & Latham, 2006). Such a development might ultimately prompt the strongest and most motivated players to leave the team, namely the strongly identified players.

Our findings contribute to a better understanding of the association between identification and normative conflict in teams. In his model, Packer (2008) referred to the possibility that identification and the perception of normative conflict might not be orthogonal factors. Specifically, he suggested that weakly identified group members might be more susceptible to normative conflict. Based on the present study, we can conclude that strongly and weakly identified group members do not differ regarding the extent to which they experience normative conflict, as indicated by a zero-correlation between identification and normative conflict. This is an important extension of the theorized associations between variables: Consistent with the NCMD (Packer, 2008), identification and normative conflict appear to be orthogonal factors.

Building on this, our findings give rise to a number of exciting theoretical and empirical follow-up questions. One perspective that is missing in contemporary conceptualizations of deviance and disengagement is the extent to which these concepts reflect agentic behavior of group members. Specifically, it appears that whereas identification does not affect individuals' appraisal of the deviance situation, it strongly affects the strategies chosen to *cope* with being deviant. Framing disengagement in terms of coping capacities opens up a completely different route to understanding disengagement. From an agentic perspective on group membership, disengagement might indicate an agentic response of weakly identified group members that allows them to cope with a situation of being deviant. Moreover, if we link these considerations to team functioning and team composition (e.g., McGrath, Arrow, & Berdahl, 2000; Moreland & Levine, 1992), the beneficial aspects of disengagement come to the fore: To the extent that disengagement is the preferred strategy of *weakly* identified members, disengagement might ultimately serve the team by positively affecting its composition. This means that a virtuous cycle might evolve in which a team is composed mainly from strongly identified, highly motivated group members.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Unquestionably, our research is limited by the field context in which it was conducted. For instance, the reported disengagement levels among weakly identified players might reflect a realistic estimation of these players about their chances to remain a team member in the future. Also, lower identification levels themselves might be an expression of players' perception that they cannot live up to the team's standards. However, we are confident that in combination with experimental research that provides support for the predictions of the NCMD (Packer & Chasteen, 2010) the results of our field study prove valuable to our understanding of norm adherence and deviance in applied settings.

It would be worthwhile for future studies to investigate the extent to which individuals perceive themselves in conflict with fellow group members. We focused on perceived conflict between individual and group norms and cannot draw conclusions about perceived intragroup conflict. However, it seems plausible to assume that perceived goal-conflict will elicit relational conflict, which likely impacts on team cohesion and performance. More research is needed to examine the association of conflicts on one level (i.e., regarding norms, goals, or tasks) with conflict on the relational level.

In line with the conceptualization put forward by Packer (2008), we have argued that the direction of deviance from the group norm should be less motivationally relevant for weakly identified group members. The lack of evidence for moderation of the predicted relationships between variables by direction of deviance supports this assumption. However, our sample was very small and very cohesive, therefore rendering instances of observed deviance rather small. We believe that the direction of deviance might be much more relevant in other group contexts, for instance in less cohesive task groups or in groups facing severe societal changes. Deviance or normative conflict might be much more prevalent under such circumstances, and will have very different implications depending on whether individual group members want less (antinorm deviance) or more (pronorm deviance) than the group. Indeed, recent research (Täuber & Sassenberg, 2011) demonstrated that experimentally manipulated pro- and antinorm deviance in task groups has very different psychological consequences. Specifically, these authors show that antinorm deviance undermines group members' need to belong because it makes them aware of their being different from the group. On the other hand, pronorm deviance undermined group members' need for achievement because it makes them aware that their group is not a valuable resource for individual development.

Conclusions

The current study demonstrates that sport teams (and, as the authors suspect, a range of other groups) need dissenters to ensure the group's welfare. Strongly identified players show a greater willingness to sacrifice the self on behalf of their team by dissenting where the norm is to conform (Prapavessis & Carron, 1997). Research indicates that in many groups, dissent is still unwelcomed and dissenters face serious backlashes from their peers, ranging

from being branded as whistle blowers to exclusion from the group, as for instance shown for moral rebels (Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008). We believe it is important to create awareness about the noble motivations for deviating, rather than conceiving of deviance as disrupting group cohesion among coaches of sports teams or leaders of groups in general.

Integrating the above considerations with the findings of the present study emphasizes the symbiotic relation between individuals' needs and group goals, a perspective that has been put forward by a number of researchers (e.g., Correll & Park, 2005; Jetten & Postmes, 2006; Moreland & Levine, 2002). We believe that both weakly identified members' disengagement from the team and strongly identified members' dissenting with the group norm are agentic individual responses to a specific group situation (Jetten & Hornsey, 2011; Täuber & Sassenberg, 2011). The way in which group members cope with normative conflict is substantially different depending on whether they identify strongly or weakly with their group. These coping strategies, although possibly benefitting the individual group members, have dramatically different outcomes for the group.

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